

“Development of Indian Traditions: Constructivist Approach
in the Design studio”

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INTBAU Conference on “New Architecture & Urbanism:
Development of Indian Traditions”, New Delhi
January 11-14, 2007

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Before we embark on the rather ambitious task of addressing the issue of tradition and culture in architectural education in India, it would be pertinent to clarify one's stand on the issue. The most natural questions to follow would be:

- A. What traditions and whose cultures?
- B. Should one take a conservative or a progressive stand?
- C. What is the authority of us educators to decide on the above?

At any given time in history these choices has been faced time and again by individuals and civilizations. The essential question is not of tradition but whether the choice to follow or ignore it be left to individuals or be usurped by the authority of institutions--be it family, community, school, college or government. It is this very fundamental question and its response that will have far reaching implications on both the choice of our educational material and the appropriate teaching methodology.

As far as the first question of what tradition and whose culture--Can we start by understanding what confronts us on a daily basis; i.e. our 'selves' and our immediate context? The reality is that each of us has many simultaneous layers of 'identities' and 'selves'. Some of these are chronological, sedimentary layers of feudal culture, colonial culture, consumer culture and now the most fashionable, eco-culture. While the older layers lie half-erased and dormant, depending on the situation one or the other might suddenly (and embarrassingly!) reveal itself. The difficulty is that one cannot isolate one layer in place and time, a mythical golden period, to claim that is our true, authentic tradition. We have to start by seeing what we are simultaneously at present, warts and all. This also naturally includes all that surrounds us in its present heterogeneous, hybrid glory.

To address the second question of conservative or progressive, one can look to nature for answers. Analogies have been drawn between genes (genetic information that replicates itself) and memes (bits of cultural 'know-how' passed on from one generation to the next by imitation)). Just as genes compete for selection, so do memes for survival (Csikszentmihalyi 1996). Just as species evolve through 'selection' and 'genetic mutation', so do cultures evolve through selection and innovation. Without getting caught in the moral debate of whether 'survival of the fittest' applies in the case of cultural selection, one can instead learn from the fact that nature does not entirely 'wipe out' less evolved life forms in favor of more evolved ones. If that was the case the planet would have been overrun by the apes. Complex life forms are dependent on relatively simpler life forms and vice versa. The real miracle of nature is the dynamic web of co-existence and interdependence.

In nature, life forms constantly adapt themselves to changing contexts to survive and if these changes occur too rapidly, they perish and so it is with cultures which cannot 'adjust'. 'Pure' strains are vulnerable to attack by disease and 'hybrid' ones are more robust. In history, very often the search for collective cultural 'authenticity' and 'purity' has been driven by anxiety about self-identity and has led to denial, stagnation, and violent acts of 'cleansing'.

What sets human beings apart is that we are blessed (or cursed) with a conscious awareness of the choice of our memes while other life forms (at least so we think) merely follow the genetic 'program'. In fact here is where education plays a critical role. An ideal education would be

that which passes on the relevant memes to the learner, while making the individual acutely conscious and aware of that inherent sense of choice. It would foster criticality (Crysler 1995) about what to stop, what to start and what to continue from tradition and the ‘norm’. It would encourage ‘self’-reflection, awareness and compassion for the ‘other’. In other words, real education would be one of empowerment, not enslavement.

There have been debates on the nature of knowledge and knowing and that has led to many philosophies and theories. The primary debate is whether knowledge exists ‘outside’ the self (objectivist) and is passively absorbed by the self or is it actively constructed by the self (constructivist). The following table (fig.1) explains the two radically different approaches further.

OBJECTIVIST	CONSTRUCTIVIST
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One correct way to structure world in terms of properties, entities and relations ▪ No prior knowledge or experience required. Prior knowledge might cloud understanding ▪ Meaning is external to the learner and is independent of the understanding of the learner ▪ Knowledge can be fragmented into specialized categories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Many ways to structure the world, determined by experience and interpretations of the learner ▪ New knowledge is built on prior knowledge and experience ▪ Meaning is imposed on the world by us and is indexed by experience ▪ Knowledge is integrated and proceeds from simple wholes to complex wholes
<p style="text-align: center;">UNIVERSAL: Regardless of self, time or place</p> <p style="text-align: center;">TEACHER CENTERED</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">CONTEXTUAL: Rooted in self, time and place</p> <p style="text-align: center;">LEARNER CENTERED</p>

Fig. 1 (source: http://www.personal.psu.edu/txl166/kb/theory/obj_con.html)

Recent neurological research has established that the human brain does work to a large extent in the manner as postulated by the constructivists (Zull 2002). The objectivist approach does not encourage multiple perspectives, and neither does it foster self-reflection (in fact it ‘neutralizes’ the learners). Its equation of power and authority is heavily tilted in the teacher’s

favor. Does this mean that it is better suited to 'science' subjects? Interestingly, research indicates that even scientific principles are ultimately 'internalized' by learners through a process of 'active construction' (Zull 2002).

For the purposes of critically examining 'self', 'culture' or 'tradition', the objectivist approach to education is too canonical, universalized and therefore clumsy. The discussion on education within the objectivist frame of reference is naturally restricted to 'what to teach' and 'curriculum', while assuming that merely restructuring the content automatically translates in to effective education (Salama 2005). Perhaps we need to pay more attention to 'how we teach what we teach' i.e., worry less about defining the ideal 'knowledge of architecture' and worry more about 'architecture of knowledge'. Constructivist approach seems to be more appropriate to fulfilling the true purpose of education mentioned earlier.

Unfortunately Architectural Education in India (like all other education for that matter) seems to be cast in the objectivist mode. It treats all learners as 'empty vessels' (Crysler 1995) and does not seek to engage with the learners' 'selves' and 'lived experience'. Instead culture, tradition and history are projected as exotic, external, fixed concepts, represented by important dates and iconic monuments.

It is important here to subject the 'culture' of architectural education in the country to some scrutiny. The first issue is our fundamental attitude to knowledge itself. The Brahminical notion of knowledge as exclusively accessible to a select few, and learning as 'repeating rituals mechanically after the master without asking questions' bestows enormous, unilateral power to the teacher (Eck 83). This equation is one of learner's absolute reverence and prostration to authority of knowledge, which is met by a stoical aloofness by the 'Guru'.

Secondly, this pattern of supplication and aloofness is played out again in the 'administration' of education (Menon 2001); from the lower most rungs of hierarchy of our over-bureaucratized colleges and universities, right up to the regulatory authorities and ministries. This mindless recourse to endless set of 'blanket rules' and procedures has been ascribed to imperial British rule and post colonial aftermath (Nair 2002).

The third layer to this pattern of authority and aloofness has to do with the idea of the profession as a 'technocracy'. With the import of modernism soon after independence and the many foreign or foreign-trained architects being patronized by the government and the private sector (Chatterjee 1985), the all round message seemed to be 'forget the past and listen to the new experts'. Bauhaus stood for the promise of social equality but came with its own problems. The architect was seen as a creative, individual genius, totally self-absorbed, aloof, and speaking an abstract language that only other architects could understand.

Modernism treats histories and cultures as 'blank slates' on which anything new could be written (Hurt 2002). This 'distancing' from culture in the garb of 'objectivity' continues to be all pervasive in contemporary architectural education (Mazumdar 1993). The 'aloofness' reflects in the manner design studio problems are framed (as self-referential puzzle solving exercises, without reference to contexts) (Mazumdar 1993), transacted (over the shoulder, tacit,

instructional ‘crits’) and evaluated (reliance on ‘external’, negative juries for ‘final judgment’) (Doidge et al’s 2000).

To sum up, the three B’s that come in the way of our critical immersion and intelligent response to tradition seem to be Brahminical notion of knowledge, aloofness of Babudom and Bauhaus induced cultural amnesia. Each of these three syndromes is damaging enough by itself, but in combination they seem to reinforce and feed each other in a self-stoking manner.

If the issue of diverse traditions and cultures is to be addressed in architectural education, it is essential that these three assumptions of power be first dismantled and devolved. However, one has to tread with caution, as it would only too easy to overthrow and take over institutions, only to replace one authority with another, as all earlier failed revolutions have shown in history. Instead it would be wise as educators to become aware of these layers of authority and aloofness that lie within our own psyches and first address them at a personal, individual level.

To conclude on a constructive note, it is suggested for discussion that the above ideas, when translated in to actual practice and policies, could result in the following list of things to ‘stop’, ‘start’ and ‘continue’:

STOP!

- Projecting culture and history only as static concepts represented by iconic monuments, but also as continuities in contemporary practice
- Following linear process of case study + analysis + synthesis = design in the design studio
- Underestimating learners’ ability to handle complexity
- Exclusivity of architectural education, only to English-science-math-urban backgrounds
- Imposing centralized, all sweeping bureaucratic norms on educational policies based on culture of mistrust

START!

- Becoming critically aware of relevance of architectural memes that are being passed on
- Making learning process experiential, reflective, cyclical, and sequentially coherent
- Adopting explicit, transparent and transformative teaching methods

- Introducing better methodological tools to understanding culture at undergraduate level
- Communicating to the learners the joy of making connections between specialized knowledge categories
- Restoring learners' trust in everyday lived experience as valid source of learning and production of new theories

CONTINUE ...

- To present contemporary architectural problems in all their complexity of contexts; physical, personal, social, historical, economic, environmental
- To engage consistently with the question of tradition and modernity throughout education
- To actively encourage multiple perspectives and peer dialogue amongst learners
- To provoke individual introspection, and encourage independent judgment
- To proactively encourage diversity of approaches in various institutions in their definition of educational contexts and pursuit of quality
- To have more forums of dialogue like this

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